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A timely Senate rebuke

A Senate letter rebuking Jesse Helms for disclosing secret information on covert CIA activity in El Salvador couldn't have come at a better time for the nation's battered intelligence services.

Mr. Helm's rare slapdown came in a letter from the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence to Senate leaders Howard Baker and Robert Byrd. It asked them to remind their fellow senators that disclosing classified committee information violates Senate rules and can involve reprimand, censure or expulsion. Mr. Helms vehemently denied that he disclosed any secrets, saying he had received from open sources the information that he made public. But his colleagues on the committee didn't buy his claim.

Reeling from unauthorized disclosures of its role in Central America, CIA officials must wonder if any covert activity can be mounted without an open debate in Congress. A CIA role in the mining of Nicaraguan harbors last month led to an uproar on Capitol Hill, and Sen. Helm's charge last week that the agency had secretly aided Jose Napoleon Duarte's election campaign produced furor in the Senate.

Senators Barry Goldwater and Daniel P. Moynihan, the chairman and vice chairman of the Senate intelligence committee, have performed a valuable national service in rebuking Mr. Helms for breaking the rules. Only rarely do members of the Senate openly assail one another; a letter to the Senate leadership proclaiming that a legislator had overstepped regulations appears unprecedented.

In a bitter world where United States intelligence services are an imperative for national survival, the CIA and other agencies must be able to operate in secrecy, their activities secure against disclosure by any of the scores of legislators privy to congressional intelligence committee information.

Congress as an institution must continue to know the extent of covert activities underway. But a way must be found to restore secrecy within Congress and the administration, and leaders on Capitol Hill must continue to police the House and Senate and sternly deal with those who break the rules.

No chagrin cuts more deeply than that provoked by the cold disdain of colleagues in Washington's most exclusive clubs.

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